

Rep. Henry A. Waxman
Remarks for the National Education
Association's Retired Annual Meeting
June 28, 2012

Thank you and good afternoon. I am delighted to address your annual meeting on a wonderful day for health care.

This is first and foremost a wonderful day for the American people. The Supreme Court has reaffirmed that the Affordable Care Act is the law of the land. While I regret that it was a 5-4 decision, it was a clear decision nonetheless.

I hope now that we have finality, people of all parties can come together, put partisanship aside, and move forward together on this issue. The truth is that this is a real victory for the American people, and now the work begins to finally address the scourge of uninsurance that has plagued our nation for so long.

As many of you know, the law is already begun to make a difference in people's lives. The law has improved health care in so many ways:

- Last year, 32.5 million seniors received one or more free preventive services; so far this year, 14 million seniors have.

- 17 million children with pre-existing conditions no longer denied coverage.
- 5.3 million seniors in the “donut hole” have saved \$3.7 billion on their prescription drugs.
- 360,000 small employers used the Small Business Health Care Tax Credit to help afford insurance for 2 million workers.

In addition to the law’s concrete benefits for consumers, the law is slowing health care cost growth. Out of pocket costs for Medicare beneficiaries are down – Part B deductible has fallen by \$22; average Medicare Advantage premiums are 7 percent lower this year than last; premiums in Part D have not increased.

The Republicans have tried time and again to repeal the law, in whole or in part. The Supreme Court decision will only cause them to redouble their efforts. The former Governor of Massachusetts, who once favored the ACA-approach to insurance, now has made a centerpiece of his campaign destroying the law that is already helping so many millions of Americans. We cannot let that happen. There is too much at stake to turn back the clocks on health and take away these important advances.

And, the threats to the Affordable Care Act are not the only threats we face. The Republicans are also looking to dismantle the programs that form the bedrock of our national health care infrastructure – Medicare and Medicaid. The Republican Party clearly has both in their crosshairs.

For decades these programs enjoyed general bipartisan support. I can remember working with Republicans and Democrats alike to cover more children under Medicaid, or strengthen Medicare and Medicaid nursing home quality standards, or help state Medicaid programs weather economic downturns. But these ideas and programs apparently have no place in today's Republican regime.

The centerpiece of the Republican efforts to unravel these programs is the Ryan Budget. This Republican plan would turn Medicare into a voucher. For more than 40 years the Medicare program has provided retirement security for Americans, ensuring that in old age, health care is available at an affordable price. The fact that just about 99% of physicians participate in Medicare is a testament to how successful the program is.

Yet, the Republicans would turn the program over to private insurance companies, giving seniors a fixed voucher to shop for coverage. For the average senior, when this plan is phased in, it would mean an extra \$6,000 more out of pocket when it takes effect in 2022. The Republican plan doesn't control costs, it just shifts them on to seniors.

The Republican budget also targets Medicaid with a vengeance – capping the program and turning it into a block grant – but not before they cut \$1.7 trillion in the next decade. What does a block grant mean: limited rights for beneficiaries, capping the federal commitment, cutting benefits, and shifting costs on to states and poor beneficiaries.

Medicaid is the program that helps mom's deliver healthy babies, and it's the program that ensures children can get eye glasses, hearing aids and well-child care – so that they can show up to school ready to learn. It helps keep kids healthy, and for those who are sick provides the treatment to get well.

And, many of you may know from experience – with your spouses, parents, and relatives – Medicaid is the largest provider for long term care in the nation – covering both home and community based services and nursing home care which aren't covered by Medicare.

The irony of all this is Republicans say we have to do this because with the graying of the population, and rising medical costs, we can't afford to protect our seniors and retirees. That is hogwash. And the idea that they won't even consider improving the revenue base for programs, when so many more need to be served, is incredible to me.

Apparently the Republican solution to addressing baby boom is to cut back on our commitment to seniors and retirees, to cut programs and benefits, and to shift costs to beneficiaries.

I'm not saying that tax and revenue is the only solution here. We need to make sure we are spending our resources wisely, and we can do that by improving quality and the delivery of care. But revenue needs to be part of the solution.

Six in ten seniors rely on Social Security for more than half of their income – and the median income for seniors is only about \$25,000 a year. And reliance on Social Security and the share of income spent on basic necessities like food, housing and health care increases as people age. Retirees on fixed incomes can't afford to pay more out of pocket – and can't afford to bear all the burden of the increased program costs. Yet that is exactly what the voucher would do.

We won't have any serious legislating in Congress before the November election. While I can't yet say with certainty what will happen in the end-of-the year legislating, we know there are certain issues that we must deal with – debt ceiling, expiring tax cuts, Medicare physician payments, and undoubtedly appropriations issues. I hope you will lend your voices to the chorus of us who are concerned about the direction the Republican leadership wants to take us.

But even more, we know what the real agenda is –

- End the Medicare guarantee by capping the program, turning it into a voucher, shifting the health care burden on to seniors;

- Block-grant the Medicaid program, shifting costs on to the poor and on to the states;
- Unravel the progress made in the Affordable Care Act such as the end to pre-existing condition discrimination, the end to life-time limits, and allowing children to remain on parents policies until age 26; and, of course,
- Silence unions and thus attempts to protest these draconian policy changes.

This is the wrong agenda for America. It is the wrong agenda for our families and children, seniors, and people with disabilities. We have to redouble our efforts to protect what we have and improve it.

We'll need all your help. But today let's savor the victory that the Court has now affirmed for the American people.